



# Shaking the Foundations: A Reply to My Critics

## Citation

Armitage, David. 2014. "Shaking the Foundations: A Reply to My Critics." Contemporary Political Theory 13 (4): 411-418.

## Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:13572059>

## Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Policy Articles, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#OAP>

## Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.  
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

## Shaking the Foundations: A Reply to My Critics<sup>†</sup>

*Foundations of Modern International Thought (FMIT)* (Armitage 2013) is a work of history that poaches shamelessly on the territory of political theory, international law, and International Relations. The book was the product of more than a decade of conversation with practitioners in these fields—some in person, many through engagement with their scholarship—and I hoped its conclusions, as well as its provocations, might continue that discussion into the future. I am therefore both flattered and humbled to receive responses to the book from five distinguished critics, none of whom is herself an historian. I must therefore begin by warmly thanking Jens Bartelson, Kimberly Hutchings, Edward Keene, Helen Kinsella, and Lea Ypi for reading my work so carefully and for offering their reactions so generously. I am also very grateful to Lisa Disch and Terrell Carver for giving me the opportunity to respond to their comments in the pages of *Contemporary Political Theory*.

When I first began working on *FMIT*, there were few glimmerings of the interdisciplinary dialogue so richly evident in this critical forum. Such work as there was in what I have called ‘international intellectual history’ was either very old or very new. Most historical study on the intellectual history of international norms, institutions, and theories stretched back to the founding decades of professional international law in the late nineteenth century or to the upsurge of internationalism in the inter-War period. After a long hiatus, described in the first chapter of *FMIT*, the turn of the twenty-first century witnessed the first efforts by historians of political thought to expand the boundaries of their field to include the international realm; that same moment also saw the emergence of historical studies by self-critical IR theorists and international lawyers (e.g. Tuck 1999; Koskeniemi 2002; Keene 2005). Little of this work was yet informed by the international and cosmopolitan strains of political theorizing that emerged in the wake of Rawls, Walzer, and Beitz, for example. The robustness and sophistication of the engagements with history and theory in this forum show how far the conversation has moved in the past decade.

---

<sup>†</sup> Forthcoming in *Contemporary Political Theory* 13 (2014).

*FMIT* was intended to be a more focused and more narrowly historical study of ‘international thought in the Age of Revolutions’ treating the international dimensions of political thought from the Seven Years’ War to the Napoleonic Wars. Its planned coverage was both firmly canonical—examining major thinkers such as Rousseau, Smith, Bentham, and Kant—and expansively contextual, dealing with non-canonical genres such as treaty-collections, diplomatic handbooks, and the earliest histories of the law of nations. I then spent much of a year reading my way into contemporary IR theory and looking for points of contact with historical work. I found them particularly in the writings of the so-called ‘English School’ of IR and in more recent studies in a constructivist and historicist vein, by Duncan Bell, Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, and others. This engagement might explain my choice of some of the figures and problems treated in *FMIT*; it certainly helped me to decide that I wanted to intervene into debates in IR, as well as those in history and political theory, and contributed to the rethinking—and ultimately to the dissolution—of my working plan for the book.

My original project may have been too ambitious and it soon exploded as one chapter expanded into a free-standing book (Armitage 2007), others appeared as separate articles, and I also took it upon myself to promote the emergent field of international intellectual history through other occasional pieces. Deconstruction precedes reconstruction, and after all this centrifugal activity, it seemed wise to collect the scattered fragments to see what they added up to something more than the academic equivalent of Frankenstein’s monster. Kimberly Hutchings is accordingly quite correct to say that *FMIT* is not ‘a systematic engagement with specific concepts’ but instead ‘an eclectic collection of essays’. I am especially grateful to her for providing an excellent roadmap of the book’s contents, especially for IR theorists. I was especially delighted that she found *FMIT* useful to her as an IR theorist and teacher for its aversion to anachronism and its warnings against oversimplification. I am also glad she saw in the book a ‘challenge to the eurocentrism of IR’—although this was not something I followed through in detail, it certainly fits with more recent attempts to decenter Europe in accounts of international relations and international law (e.g. Acharya and Buzan 2010; Kayaoğlu 2010; Hobson 2012).

Conversely, Hutchings is right to say that my selection of case-studies could serve to ‘reinscribe a history of international thought in which certain developments in Anglophone international political thinking in particular, are predominant,’ a worry Jens Bartelson shares. That was certainly not my intention because my selection of cases was not meant to confine the methods of international intellectual history to English-language materials—or even, for that matter, to European sources—alone, even though many British thinkers are still coin of the realm in IR courses. I would want *FMIT* to work strenuously against any attempt to create ‘a new master narrative’ to replace the Westphalian ‘myth of 1648,’ whether pivoting around 1776 or any other date. It would obviously be a mistake to propose a single alternative starting-point and I consciously chose to drop the definite article from my title—*Foundations*, not *The Foundations*—for that very reason. My series of overlapping and intersecting perspectives was meant instead to suggest multiple moments of conceptual generation (as well as degeneration) and to question the notion of any one teleological story of the advance toward modernity. I therefore wholeheartedly endorse Hutchings’s view that we need ‘pluralism’ in our intellectual histories of international relations.

However, I wish I could be as confident as Hutchings that ‘the debunking message’ of some of the chapters ‘reads now as somewhat superfluous from the point of view of contemporary history of ideas in International Relations’. Historical study of ideas in IR has advanced greatly in recent years, as figures like Hobbes and Burke have been dethroned from their positions as timeless theorists rather than time-bound thinkers (compare Prokhovnik and Slomp 2011; Bourke 2015), but there is still a long way to go. As Beate Jahn has noted, ‘studies in intellectual history will only overcome their marginal position in our field when they link their subject area and findings explicitly to contemporary debates in International Relations and concrete issues in international politics’ (Jahn 2010). I hope that by joining the classics to discussions of contemporary issues—among them, the meaning of globalization; legislative authority over the executive in foreign affairs; and the procedures for declaring new states—*FMIT* will help to inspire more work on the intellectual origins of our current international order (compare Sluga 2013).

Connective as well as global approaches to these questions will be essential if we are to discover how ideas circulated from multiple centers, metropolitan and non-metropolitan, and around the world (Moyn and Sartori 2013). Only then will we understand how international thought became internationalized, as part of the proliferation of multiple modernities and competing universalisms that accompanied the moving tides of globalization in the last five centuries (compare Armitage, Bol, Ge, Jenco, and Murthy 2013). Such work would, I trust, help to allay some of Jens Bartelson's fears about the possible effects of *FMIT* as propagating 'a fairly conventional and at times conservative view of international relations'. I aimed only to offer examples of practice in international intellectual history, targeted at some of the professional pillars common to political theorists, IR theorists, and intellectual historians. Yet I did hope that the historical methods I use could also be applied to more radical strains of international thought: in this regard, I am particularly pleased to see that historical studies of anarchism in international relations theory have now begun to blossom (Kazmi 2012; Prichard 2013; Kazmi 2014).

Even more satisfying would be to have more historical work on what Bartelson calls the 'holistic and universalistic world orders' that challenged the modern international system. Here Bartelson's own recent work on visions of world order might be a better guide than *FMIT* (Bartelson 2009), although a fusion of horizons—between *FMIT*'s historicist practice and Bartelson's critical international theory—should certainly be possible, as part of the emergent field of global intellectual history. It may be tempting to take pot-shots as sitting ducks, as Bartelson notes, but as both he and Edward Keene urge, there will be happier hunting if we range further afield, beyond the conventional canon selected for long-forgotten or obsolete disciplinary reasons. They suggest that we look instead to the 'lesser and sometimes long forgotten names,' those 'communities of practitioners' who actively constituted the international realm and who left behind less formal examples of international thought.

In regard to novel sources, Keene's questions about international thought are a version of Lenin's 'Who, whom?': '[W]here was international thinking happening, and who was doing it?' His first question might seem to be an extension of my own recommendation that intellectual historians should generally be more alert to space: not

simply the spatial dimensions of thought about the continental, oceanic, transregional and global, but more specifically the concrete locales: the very rooms, buildings, and institutional settings in which thinking took place. The second question means not figures like Hugo Grotius, John Locke, or John Stuart Mill, whose theories arose in part from their practical work on behalf of European overseas trading companies (Muthu 2013); instead, Keene alerts students of international thought to the producers of ‘medium thought’ (Rothschild 2005)—journalists, publicists, the editors of treaty-collections, and popular historians among them—and his advice would also lead us to the work of diplomats, envoys, consuls, missionaries of modernization, and the functionaries of international institutions such as the League of Nations, the United Nations, and UNESCO in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mining their writings would reinforce Keene’s point that ‘international thought cannot be extracted from the political theory canon’. The concern might be that we would lose political theorists from the exercise of international intellectual history if we stray too far from their normative interests.

I would very much like to see the flourishing of the interdisciplinary research programme Keene recommends—on ‘the relationship between international thought, international practices and international publics’—especially if it could be tied to a more broadly cultural history of the international and also if it took full account of the history of political economy, one of the most fertile new fields in the study of international thought (e.g. Stern and Wennerlind 2014). Yet, if Keene wants international intellectual history ‘to become more than just a reshuffling of the political theory pack,’ then I imagine Lea Ypi and Helen Kinsella might think political theory itself would get short shrift from such a development. For Ypi, in particular, the question is not *where* to find international thought or its foundations, but how to find ‘the most fruitful way to engage historians and normative theorists in a productive intellectual exchange’. One way to do this, as she shows, is to use history to ‘disrupt [the] foundations’ of the contemporary international order, not least by exposing its complicity with empire (as Kinsella also argues).

Exhibit A for Ypi, as for many historically minded critical theorists, is John Locke. She is certainly correct that Locke would have had no interest in joining ‘a

politically irrelevant controversy which was moreover philosophically moribund’ regarding the freedom of the sea in the late seventeenth century: Grotius had won this argument over his adversary John Selden, decades earlier, as Locke’s own definition of the ocean—‘that great and remaining Common of Mankind’ (2<sup>nd</sup> *Treatise*, § 30)—revealed. I remain less certain that Locke can be assimilated wholesale to the modern tradition of liberalism, with its combination of ‘universalistic rationality ... coupled with a defence of the need for paternalistic interventions’. As I argued in *FMIT* itself, I believe that broadly Kantian conception of liberal foundations—which Ypi subtly reaffirms in her own contribution—cannot be projected back onto Locke, who did not doubt the capacities of non-Europeans to be fully rational, whose paternalism targeted the English poor rather than indigenous peoples, and who never followed Kant—at least, the early Kant—into anything that looks like modern racism.

I am therefore skeptical that Locke himself would ever have produced an ‘evolutionary defence of the superiority of Europeans’. Some later Lockeans would selectively invoke him to that effect in the Early American Republic or colonial New South Wales, for instance, but the very same arguments were also deployed to defend indigenous property rights (Fitzmaurice 2014). There are undoubtedly imperial pillars underpinning our current global order (compare Tully 2008), but whether Locke is the culprit on whom we should expend our critique is not so obvious, at least to me. Nonetheless, despite these slight disagreements, Ypi is surely quite right to insist that historical evidence deployed to critical ends comprises a major reason why the history of international thought should be of pressing concern to political theorists.

Helen Kinsella fortifies this motive for political theorists to engage in historical discussion when she writes approvingly of ‘the *interference* with other things—concepts, categories, assumptions—that international intellectual history represents and foments’. She contrasts this with Kenneth Waltz’s rather more complacent attachment to the ‘wonderful literature’ represented by the canon of political theory from Plato to Machiavelli and beyond (Waltz and Fearon 2012). My own desire was and is definitely to be ‘disruptive’ rather than ‘utilitarian,’ not to uphold the foundations of modern international thought but to shake them. It is in this spirit that I take Kinsella’s account of some of *FMIT*’s oversights so seriously. It is true that the book pays little attention ‘to the

dispossessed and the excluded': their voices in the international conversation need to be recovered like the neglected sources Keene highlights in this contribution. Theirs would not be just-so stories but I keenly wonder what the 'story ... for the twentieth century' Kinsella hopes for (along with Tracy Strong) would look like if composed by them. Finally, I could not agree more with her that 'the split between the internal and external' deserves much more concentrated attention from historians and theorists alike. I proposed that as one of the most important open questions for the field of international intellectual history Kinsella's own recent work effectively points the way it might be historicized, and its politics—especially its gender politics—excavated to critical effect (Kinsella 2011) and we might follow other feminist scholars in tracing the sexing of the state to pursue this vital theme (compare Corcoran 1997; Simons 2003).

Kinsella generously extrapolates from my own work to conclude her remarks by asking 'how international intellectual history [can] vivify questions about contemporary crises of thought and practice'. Her brief but provocative thoughts on Afghanistan reach well beyond my own cases but they reveal how the layered history of space—especially territorialized space—in such a contested part of the world. Territoriality is rapidly becoming a fertile object of study in its own right among both theorists and historians (Elden 2013; Maier 2014). If I were writing *FMIT* now, I would pay much more attention to this dimension of the modern international order. Kinsella's account illustrates how multiple layers of rule, of authority, of boundedness can co-exist without superseding one another. Just as there is no linear narrative of territorialization, she implies, so there is no consummation of Weberian statehood. The international order is always becoming, never being because our world is formally post-colonial but only incompletely post-imperial.

In light of the richly engaged contributions to this forum, I now see *FMIT* as perhaps too formalist and itself incomplete. I may have been too hard-edged in my attempts to excavate and upset some of the foundations of modern international thought. A linguistically more diverse canon; a wider range of sources; greater attention to gender and the subaltern; even greater intolerance of grand narratives—all these would have made the book better and its message more effective. I would also now view the foundations as more like those of ancient Rome in Freud's famous metaphor from *Civilization and Its Discontents*: that is, conceived not as 'a human habitation but as a



psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past'. One layer does not replace another; each new building is not constructed from the stones of the ones that came before; but 'all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one. ... Where the Coliseum now stands we could at the same time admire Nero's vanished golden house' (Freud 1989: 16-18). The foundations laid down between the early seventeenth century and the early nineteenth century might be the equivalent of the Domus Aurea; later conceptions of international thought—metropolitan and colonial; supremacist and subaltern; anarchic and utopian—have risen up alongside them like the Coliseum without entirely effacing or erasing them. That may be an unsettling thought for those who believe history is smoothly progressive rather than messily cumulative, but such disruption was the real aim of my book as 'an exercise in how to think rather than what to think' (Wolfson 2013). I am lucky to have found such a congenial group of interlocutors to carry forward that project of shaking the foundations of modern international thought.

## References

- Acharya, A., and Buzan, B. (eds.) (2010). *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives On and Beyond Asia*. London: Routledge.
- Armitage, D. (2000). *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Armitage, D. (2007). *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Armitage, D. (2013). *Foundations of Modern International Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Armitage, D., Bol, P., Ge, Z., Jenco, L., and Murthy, V. (2013). 'Critical Forum: The International Turn in Intellectual History.' *Intellectual History* (Taipei), 1: 213-416.
- Bartelson, J. (2009). *Visions of World Community*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourke, R. (2015). *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Corcoran, S. 'Does a Corporation Have a Sex?'. In Naffine, N., and Owens, R. J. (eds.) (1997), *Sexing the Subject of Law*, pp. 215-232. North Ryde, NSW: LBC Information Services.
- Elden, S. (2013). *The Birth of Territory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Freud, S. (1989). *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Fitzmaurice, A. (2014). *Property, Sovereignty and Empire, 1500-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hobson, J. (2012). *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760-2010*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jahn, B. (2010). Review of Ian Hall and Lisa Hill (eds.), *British International Thinkers from Hobbes to Namier* (2009). *International Affairs* 86(6): 1411-1412.
- Kayaoğlu, T. (2010). *Legal Imperialism: Sovereignty and Extraterritoriality in Japan, the Ottoman Empire and China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kazmi, Z. (2012). *Polite Anarchy in International Relations Theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kazmi, Z. (2014). 'Contesting the State of Nature: Anarchism and International Relations.' In Levy, C., and Newman, S. (eds.), *The Anarchist Imagination: Anarchism Encounters the Humanities and the Social Sciences*. London: Psychology Press.
- Keene, E. (2005). *International Political Thought*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Kinsella, H. (2011). *The Image before the Weapon: A Critical History of the Distinction between Combatant and Civilian*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Koskenniemi, M. (2002). *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law, 1890-1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maier, C. S. (2014). *Leviathan 2.0: Inventing Modern Statehood*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Moyn, S. and Sartori, A. (eds.) (2013). *Global Intellectual History*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Muthu, S. (ed.) (2013). *Empire and Modern Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Prichard, A. (2013). *Justice, Order and Anarchy: The International Political Theory of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*. London: Routledge.
- Prokhovnik, R., and Slomp, G. (2011). *International Political Theory after Hobbes: Analysis, Interpretation and Orientation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rothschild, E. (2006). 'Language and Empire, c. 1800.' *Historical Research* 76(200): 208-229.
- Simons, P. (2003). 'The Emergence of the Idea of the Individualized State in the International Legal System.' *Journal of the History of International Law* 5: 293-335.
- Sluga, G. (2013). *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Stern, P., and Wennerlind, C. (eds.) (2014). *Mercantilism Reimagined: Political Economy in Early Modern Britain and its Empire*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tuck, R. (1999). *The Rights of War and Peace: Political Thought and International Order from Grotius to Kant*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Tully, J. (2008). *Public Philosophy in a New Key*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Waltz, K., and Fearon, J. (2012). 'A Conversation with Kenneth Waltz.' *Annual Review of Political Science* 15(1): 1-12.
- Wolfson, M. (2013). 'The Origins of Globalisation.' *Prospect Blog* (14 May 2013): <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/blog/david-armitage-foundations-of-modern-international-thought-review/#.UZJehLG9KSM>

David Armitage  
 Harvard University  
 Cambridge, MA 02138, USA  
[armitage@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:armitage@fas.harvard.edu)